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Beliefs of first year future teacher students on education and teaching – an exploratory study

Adina Glava^{a*}, Cătălin Glava^b

^{a, b}*Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education, 7 Sindicatelor Street, Cluj-Napoca, 400029, Romania*

Abstract

The paper includes a study of first year students' beliefs regarding education and school teaching and learning and aims at identifying a set of benchmarks for the increase of academic programme's relevance in relation with students' conceptions on important subjects they will promote as professionals. The literature on quality of teaching draws the attention on the importance of teachers' beliefs, that are constructions representing a personal interpretation of own professional and personal experiences related to school and education. Based on the data, the study offers a set of curriculum development solutions, oriented towards a more efficient academic teacher training programme.

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Keywords: beliefs and personal theories; teacher training; reflection.

1. Theoretical background and motivation of study

The pedagogical discourse of the last decade underlines the key role the teacher has in designing and providing an effective educational programme (Hativa, 2000; Opre, 2010; Borich, 2011; Hattie, 2014) and the positive correlation existing between teachers' capacity of reflection regarding own teaching practice and students' quality of learning (Korthagen et. al, 2001). Exercising reflection on the main important topics teachers encounter in their professional practice must become a principle infused into the initial and continuing teachers' training.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +4-0745-167298; fax: +4-0264-590559.
E-mail address: adina.glava@ubbcluj.ro

While reflecting on professional topics the student teachers begin structuring their personal theories and professional beliefs, which will heavily inform their future teaching practices (Hativa, 2000; Anderson & Olsen, 2006; Buehl & Fives, 2009; Opre, 2010; Hattie, 2014).

The personal theories on professional topics are defined in the existing literature as a personalised perspective on most important subjects and roles teachers has that is based on professional knowledge as well as on personal and professional school experiences (Opre, 2010). In the same line, the professional beliefs are regarded as constructions representing a personal interpretation of own professional and personal experiences related to school and education.

Exploring teachers and future teacher students' personal beliefs and theories may become a necessity in the context of the preoccupation for enhancing the quality and relevance of teacher training programmes. While having a variable degree of awareness about their professional theories, teachers are influenced in their professional decisions and teaching behaviours they select by these theories. Moreover, in the initial and continuing teacher training, the previous educational experiences of the students and their representations and beliefs regarding school and schooling are the foundations for construction of new knowledge and understanding on these topics. When referring to the first year student teachers, their preconceptions tend to be very stable and are difficult to deconstruct. On the other hand, their learning and development is enhanced when preconceived understandings are drawn upon (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000). Consequently, we were interested in exploring the personal beliefs and theories students enter the teacher training programme with is essential for taking the further decisions on academic programmes development.

Based on the data obtained the study intends to offer a set of internal adaptation curriculum development solutions, oriented towards a more efficient teacher training academic programme. The key element of our set of solutions will be the training of future teachers' reflection capacity.

2. Method and results

2.1. Context

Our study was focused on identifying first year future teacher students' initial beliefs on education and teaching in order to structure possible study and learning experiences helpful for building rational and effective professional beliefs and theories. The research we initiated aims at answering two main questions:

1. What are the beliefs of future teacher students regarding important professional topics: education, teaching and role of a teacher?
2. What are the main focal points that define students' beliefs?

The general premise we started from is that first year students already formed some of their personal beliefs on education from sources they encountered in their life as preuniversity students.

Thus, as research mentions (Crow, 1998; Woolfolk & Murphy, 2001, quoted by Opre, 2010), an important source for personal beliefs regarding what (good) teaching is represented by the very schooling experience one had, that is reach in teacher models and behaviour patterns, learning and evaluation experiences etc. Students also enter teacher training programmes with personal experiences regarding role of teacher as it is acknowledged in society, status of school in relation with community and work market etc. These all may be sources for first professional beliefs which will be later refined or sometimes restructured as a consequence of students' interaction with formal scientific knowledge thought in the university.

In the present study we explored elements of personal beliefs as declared by students. They form students exposed theory and will be later on, during the initial teacher training and their professional practice completed and nuanced by the practical theories or the theories in use.

The investigation implied forty seven (47) participants, first year future primary and preschool teacher students, all female and being at the classical university studies age. Data collection stage was organized after first two weeks of first year of schooling. Students were asked to offer their personal opinion by continuing the following sentences: *a. For me, education is..../ b. Based on my experience so far, teaching means.../ and c. The conclusion about being a teacher I have reached during the school years is....*

The survey was focused on students' reports. Consequently, a set of qualitative data was collected on a base of three sentence continuation sheet.

2.2. Data analysis

The data collected took the form of affirmative statements or, in some cases, general key ideas, which we were able to organize according to nine focal points, as follows:

Table 1: Main focal points in data organisation

Topics:	Education	Teaching and learning	Role of the teacher
focused on:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Process</i> aspects and attributes • <i>Products</i> • <i>Qualitative and axiological</i> labels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Process</i> focused • <i>Products</i> of learning focused • <i>Critical</i> reflections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Specific roles</i> • <i>Educational intentions</i> • <i>Specific features</i>

The sorting of the categories was based on the understanding of the researcher and is supported by the explanatory models generally accepted in the Romanian pedagogy that define education, teaching and learning in terms of products as well as processes that support a certain set of quality characteristics, and that signify the role of teacher in relation to certain label concepts and aims or sets of specific delimited behavioural and axiological features.

We collected a total set of 177 entries (E) of information that we considered as independent of one another in the present study and we investigated the density of answers that fall into above mentioned categories. This implies that the rows included in the following three tables (tables 2, 3 and 4) do not represent individual participants, but important ideas mentioned in students' answers. The same participant could mention more than one important aspect in her complex answer, a case when we considered her contribution in more than one category.

Consequently, we included quantitative analyses of data both in relation with the total number of participants and the number of important aspects of their answer for each of the three topics of the study.

2.3. Data regarding students' beliefs on the topic of education. Discussion

The data organised under the category of visions about significance of education was grouped as follows:

Table 2: Views on education

Process related views on education (E=12)				25.5 % (N=47)
development 4	learning 3	openness in communication 3	transfer of ideas 2	
Products related views on education (E=30)				63.8%(N=47)
personality development – values, character 11	development of society 7	set of results 6	social integration 6	
Qualitative / axiological labels (E=26)				55.5%(N=47)
essential 15	permanent 8	key to success 3		

Nearly a quarter of the participating students saw education as a *process* oriented in the sense of pupils' development (4 answers), learning (3 answers), open communication (3 answers) and transfer of ideas (2 answers). The view of very little number of students was focused on education as a transmission of ideas, a perspective that otherwise is very largely shared by the collective opinion. The fact that the majority of students that fall into this category of answers equal education with learning, development and communication signals an initial orientation of them towards teaching as supporting pupils' positive evolution.

Yet, a large number of participants (63.8%) had answers related to education as a set of products. Six of the answers were general (education targets a set of results), while the majority of them described the larger goals education focuses on: development of personality, development of society, social integration. An intuition of main

functions of education is visible here, with a possible deeper accent of the anthropo-centred view on education, then on the socio-centred one.

Given the little formal knowledge experience first year students have at the beginning of their studies, their focus on education as a product was to be expected. We anticipate that the deeper insight they will have in the training years on the processes of teaching and learning will make them increasingly aware on the importance of processes in education as well as that of products.

Almost a third (26) of students' visions on education were expressed through synthetic qualitative labels that lead to the idea of general recognition the importance and permanence of education. Given the academic specialisation participants follow, we notice the generally positive attitude towards the education students start their initial teacher training programme with.

2.4. Data regarding students' views on teaching and learning. Discussion

When asked to emphasise their perspective on teaching, some of the participants evoked learning in relation with teaching (17) while others were not able to give a general image, but have chosen to present own experiences with teaching and learning (14). In our vision this is due to the little formal knowledge experiences first year students have in relation to the processes and principles of school teaching and learning.

Table 3: Data on students' views regarding teaching and learning

Teaching and learning as processes (E=11)				23.4% (N=47)
process	interactive / involves students	construction	modification	
6	3	1	1	
Teaching and learning as sets of products (E=20)				42.5% (N=47)
acquiring information	preparation for life	learning how to learn		
13	5	2		
Critical attributes and reflections (E=23)				48.93%(N=47)
inadequate	difficult	depends on the student	implies total engagement	depends on the teacher
14	5	2	1	1

Table 3 includes the vision of participants on the topics of teaching and learning, organised according to three main focalisations: processes, products and critical attributes. Thus, 23.4 % of students referred to teaching as to a process that involves pupils and is focused on construction and modification. Yet a larger number of participants saw teaching as a set of products, a vision that is consistent with the way students saw education in general. It is important to notice the types of results mentioned which are consistent with the main issues expressed by the actual policies and theories in education (*Key competences for lifelong learning. European Reference Framework, 2006*): preparation for life (5 answers) and learning how to learn (2 answers). These visions prove the incipient understanding students have regarding the larger long term goals teaching must be focused on, even though the views of teaching and learning as acquiring knowledge prevails in the answers of the participants.

The tendency identified in the third category answers needs more attention, as most of the attributes associate with teaching mentioned by participants incline to be negative. Based probably on their schooling experience, first year students appreciate that present teaching is inadequate (14 answers) and difficult (5 answers), a sign of their initial capacity for critical analysis that may be further developed.

2.5. Data regarding students' beliefs on the role of a teacher. Discussion

Table 4: Beliefs of students on role of the teacher

Specific roles (E=15)						31.9% (N=47)
model	educator	keeper of knowledge	conveyer of information	guider	negative social status	
7	3	2	1	1	1	
Educational intentions (E=7)						14.8% (N=47)
motivates			shapes the personality			

4				3		
Features (E=33)				70.2 % (N=47)		
vocation and dedication 14	responsible 7	educates oneself permanently 5	likes working with children 3	specialist 2	freedom of decision 1	genuine personality 1

When reflecting about the perspective of being a teacher and on the roles this position implies, about a third of the students named a specific role, out of the mentioned ones the role of a model (7 answers) being prevalent. None of the mentioned roles referred to specific teaching and school learning activities, such as that of the organiser of knowledge, evaluator or advisor. Yet there were some single answers that are closer to this vision as they see teachers as guiders or keeper and conveyer of information (a total of 4 answers).

Most of the students referred to teachers as illustrators of certain specific features. Initial beliefs include recognition of the responsibilities and mission of teachers that is driven not only by the formal professional attributions but also by vocation and dedication (14 answers) and the desire for permanent development (5 answers).

3. Implications for the academic programmes

On the bases of this study, our intention is to formulate a set of internal adaptation solutions for improvement of initial teacher training programmes so they support the formation of more informed personal theories and beliefs regarding teaching profession and its roles in future teachers. That implies knowing initial students' beliefs and building on them, on one hand, and raising the capacity of students to become aware of their personal theories and beliefs and of their influence on teaching decisions.

The main principle that organise all the others and we consider crucial for gaining awareness and for structure personal and professional experiences towards personal theories and beliefs is training the future teacher students' reflection and self-reflection capability, a principle that is pertinently argued for by the studies of Korthagen et al. (2006).

Reflection may be exercises in a study environment that is favorable to learning. In the university such a learning environment must include relevant and practical challenges for learning, a high level of personal engagement in problem solving and in overpassing the cognitive conflicts, high expectations from teachers and trust in students' capabilities (Hattie, 2014), the existence of numerous situations for challenging own beliefs and theories by involvement into the situational learning, role play and problem based learning (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1989).

Moreover, reflection may be oriented towards enhancing the bases of students' professional metacognitive knowledge, a task that may be approached during practical training, through emphasizing on self-observation, evocation of personal justifications for the didactic decisions and through use of professional journal reflections.

4. Conclusion

In this study, first year future teacher students' initial beliefs on main pedagogical topics, education, teaching and role of teacher, was analysed. A set of general focal points was identified that are mainly related with products of education teaching and iconic roles of teachers. Consequently, a set of training principles was devised that have as a common element the training of students' reflection capability.

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